

Row Over Manchester

By Robert J. Donovan
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Reflecting on the squabble over William Manchester's book, it is hard to resist the feeling that the murder of President John F. Kennedy was such a monstrous evil that men's lives will long be tainted by it.

In a sense the anguish in New York last week was another of the dark tragedies spreading as endlessly as sound waves since the shots were fired in Dallas. The quarrel over "The Death of a President" was a particularly miserable affair with the singular distinction of hurting absolutely everyone involved.

Even American character came off poorly in the resulting publicity. It has been a while since an unlovelier commentary on the subject has appeared anywhere than that which was contained in The Wall Street Journal's account of what the Manchester book supposedly tells about the tragic trip back from Dallas

after the assassination.

Alluding to a reference in the still unpublished book, the Journal reported that "on arriving in Washington, Kennedy men and Johnson men actually tussled for possession of the dead President's casket, even dropping it at one point."

Not Soon Forgotten

That there was any such horrible scene is passionately denied by certain persons aboard Air Force 1 that day. But now the story is aboard and, true or otherwise, it will not be soon forgotten.

With grace and courage, Jacqueline B. Kennedy has endured since the morning of Nov. 22, 1963, almost more agony than a human being can bear. Yet the hullabaloo in New York last week unleashed criticism and gossip about her that chips away at the exalted position she has occupied since the splendors of Arlington.

Sen. Robert F. Kennedy, who was having troubles

enough at the time with J. Edgar Hoover, was doused with another wave of unwanted publicity. It included the usual quota of comment that he was being ruthless and arrogant and was trying to have history written in a manner that suited his purpose.

President Johnson was tarnished by the spate of stories reporting that the book depicts him as crude, heartless and greedy for power in the hours after the murder of his predecessor.

Honor, Reliability Questioned

Certainly Manchester was hurt. His honor and his reliability were questioned by his adversaries, including Mrs. Kennedy, who commissioned the book. The way he handled sale of the manuscript in light of the agreement he had entered into with the Kennedys was dubious at best.

Furthermore, he can now have little joy or satisfaction in bringing out a book in such circumstances, particularly

THE Book Left Everyone

when the manuscript has been picked over by sundry negotiators under the eyes of lawyers trying to resolve a legal conflict.

Finally, not the least of the victims is the book itself. It is not only that interesting material has been deleted. Beyond that, the sensational fight to force these deletions is likely to condemn the work to the kind of doubts that, however unfairly, plague the Warren Commission report. At every turn many people will wonder what has been cut out, and why.

It was inevitable, too, that the uproar, with its hint of further tension between the Kennedys and the Johnsons, should have caused speculation about the possible political effects of the book.

Help or Hurt Johnson?

If there was speculation, however, there was little unanimity of viewpoints.

On Tuesday, a headline in The Wall Street Journal said,

"The Manchester Book Could Hurt Johnson's '68 Reelection Chance." The thesis was that voters would be repelled by Manchester's depiction of Mr. Johnson's conduct on the return from Dallas.

The same day the headline appeared, however, one of the President's chief political advisers said that, if anything, the book would help Mr. Johnson. His reasoning was that fair-minded people would sympathize with the man in the White House if they concluded that he had been besmirched by a biased author.

The circles in which the possible effects of the book were discussed included the staff of the Republican National Committee and the associates of Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey, who are always sensitive to political winds that blow around Robert Kennedy.

Like many others in Washington, they tended to believe

that the political effects would be negligible. By 1968 and certainly by 1972, the year in which Kennedy may seek the presidency, the haggling over the Manchester book will be ancient history.

The Manchester affair shows among other things what a Frankenstein's monster publicity has become for the Kennedy family.

Thrived on Publicity

No other American family ever thrived on publicity to such an extent. The flavor, the wit, the beauty, the pride, the tastes, the feats, the abundance of the Kennedys have been for years one of the great staples of the world's newspapers, magazines and television networks.

From Washington, London, Boston, Hyannis Port and Palm Beach the Kennedys fed the mills of publicity. Publicity brought them fame and helped them to political power. Never was the White

Wounded

House such a glittering stage as when they were there.

The public's appetite for news about the Kennedys became so keen that even in the joyous years the publicity mills were grinding beyond their wishes. There were the lavish accounts of Pablo Casals playing the cello in the East Room, which they relished. But there also were some rather lavish accounts of people being tossed into Ethel Kennedy's swimming pool, which they most emphatically did not relish.

Now, in the shade of tragedy, the public craving for Kennedy stories of the kind that are said to be in the Manchester book has reached the point where it is difficult for the family to maintain its rightful privacy. Or perhaps family is the wrong word. The earthquake over the Manchester book was further proof, if any were needed, that the Kennedys are now an institution.